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General Society of  
Mechanics...

1785[-]1914. Historical  
sketch and government...

[New York]

[1914]

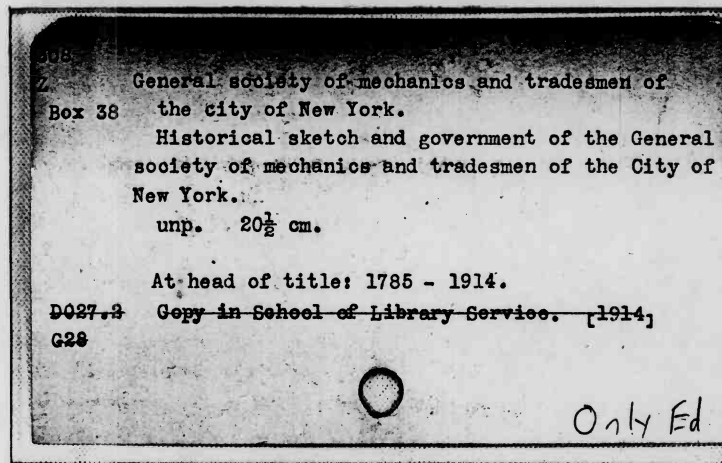
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1785[-]1914. Historical sketch and government of the  
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1785

1914

HISTORICAL SKETCH  
AND  
GOVERNMENT  
OF THE  
GENERAL SOCIETY  
OF MECHANICS  
AND TRADESMEN  
OF  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK





MECHANICS INSTITUTE  
16-24 WEST 44TH STREET

INTENTIONAL SECOND EXPOSURE



MECHANICS INSTITUTE  
16-24 WEST 44TH STREET

GENERAL SOCIETY OF MECHANICS  
AND TRADESMEN  
OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK.

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**Historical Sketch**

THE condition of affairs in the city of New York at the close of the Revolutionary War was one of depression and embarrassment, in the midst of which a company of mechanics conceived the idea that by an organized fraternity the burdens of the day could best be borne, and for that purpose a meeting was held on the 17th of November, 1785, at Walter Heyer's tavern, in King (now Pine) Street, near Broadway.

Twenty-two persons were present at the meeting, and a "General Committee of Mechanics" was formed, with Robert Boyd as its chairman, composed of representative delegates elected by the several trades having separate organizations, which were considered branches of the General Committee, the committee designating the delegates for trades not organized. The object of the

organization thus formed was to provide for worthy artisans in case of sickness and distress, and to promote and encourage by mutual aid the mechanic interests of the city, being a modification of the "guilds" of Europe. In 1788, friendly relations were formed with a kindred body, then existing under the name of the "Manufacturing Society," by a joint committee of conference, composed of one-half from each, which continued for four years, when the Manufacturing Society gave up its distinctive organization, and many of the members joined the Mechanics, the name then being changed to its present title, "The General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen of the City of New York," under which it was incorporated for charitable purposes by charter passed by the Legislature, March 14, 1792, which has since been extended and amended by supplemental acts as circumstances required.

Taverns being the only places for meetings in those days the question of owning its own hall for meetings agitated the Society soon after its incorporation; but the matter was not finally and satisfactorily disposed

until May, 1802, by the purchase from ex-Mayor Richard Varick, of the plot of land at the northwest corner of Broadway and Robinson Street (now Park Place), and the Society at once set about the erection of a Mechanics' Hall, which was completed and dedicated on January 4, 1803, with appropriate ceremonies, Hon. Edward Livingston, then Mayor of the city, being present and a large assemblage of other distinguished citizens.

This building remained until 1870, when the present commercial building was erected on its site, now known as the "Varick Building."

The Society has never lost sight of its primary object—benevolence—but as its income became sufficient has appropriated a portion of its funds for the establishment of a school and an apprentices' library. In May, 1821, a lease was obtained from the city for plots of ground, 10-14 Chambers Street. A building was erected, the cornerstone of which was laid on the 13th of June, and on the 26th of November of the same year it was dedicated with suitable exercises as the "Mechanics' Institution." The

school and library, both of which had been commenced about a year previously in rooms hired at the corner of Tryon Row and Chat-ham Street, were moved to this building. The Mechanics' School was intended for the gratuitous education of the children of indigent or deceased members only, but soon grew in such favor, that upon application, other children were admitted upon the payment of a moderate sum for tuition. It was successfully continued until the increasing merits of the public free schools rendered it no longer necessary, and in December, 1858, it was discontinued, and in January following the Society established the present evening classes, enabling those engaged during the day to acquire gratuitous tuition in free-hand, mechanical and architectural drawing, modeling in clay, or elementary mathematics. Technical lectures on studies pursued in the class-rooms were also maintained.

The Apprentices' Library opened in conjunction with the school in 1820, with a nucleus of less than four hundred volumes, increased in usefulness. It was no longer in any sense an apprentices' library, but a free



library, to all persons who were entitled to the gratuitous use of books under its rules.

The Chambers Street building becoming inadequate for the needs of the library and school, the Society in February, 1832, purchased the High School building, on Crosby Street near Grand, with its furniture, but before the building could be made ready for occupancy the cholera scourge broke out in the city and the Society tendered the use of the building to the city authorities as a temporary hospital, which was accepted.

In the following October, after the building had been prepared for occupancy, the library, the school and meeting rooms of the Society were removed from the Chambers Street building. The Society, to obtain an entrance from Broadway to its Crosby Street building purchased in November, 1845, the connecting house and lot (No. 472) on that thoroughfare.

The need of a more suitable building for the use of the Society being apparent, in June, 1877, it purchased the Suydam mansion, at 18 East Sixteenth Street. After necessary alterations and furnishing, the library, school, reading-rooms and its busi-

ness offices were removed from the Broadway and Crosby Street buildings, which were leased for business purposes. The new building was dedicated with appropriate exercises on January 22, 1878.

The continual progress northward of the residential portion of the city, as well as the requirements of enlarged accommodations for the several educational features of the Society, compelled thoughtful consideration of the need of another building, but before plans for the erection of a suitable one were matured, the substantial structure, 16-24 West Forty-fourth Street, was found to be well adapted to the requirements of the Society, and after negotiation with the officials of Columbia University (its owner), it became the property of the Society. After but few alterations this building was dedicated to its new uses with appropriate exercises, January 3, 1900.

In 1833, by amendment to its charter, the Society was authorized to increase its usefulness by reserving a portion of its income for the purposes of "promoting and disseminating literary and scientific knowledge," which was determined could best be done

by means of lectures, and more recently a still further feature has been added to the work of the Society—that of maintaining scholarships in the New York Trade School. These latter are annually awarded to such deserving applicants, as, by their position in life, would be materially benefited by acquiring a knowledge of a skilled trade.

The founding of the Mechanics' Bank by this Society, in 1810, was an enlightened movement and created no little excitement, for up to that period only three banks had been organized in New York, it not being easy to obtain charters from the Legislature unless for the best of reasons. The motive was to benefit mechanical interests, the charter providing that a portion of the stock should be offered to mechanics of the State of New York in preference to anyone else. For many years seven (a majority) of the bank directors were, by the terms of the charter, chosen from the members of this Society, whose president was an *ex-officio* member of the board; and of that number four must actually follow a mechanical profession.

The career of this Society from its

foundation has been one of continued activity, prosperity and success; its field of usefulness extending as its means increased, and with a record of honest devotion to its primary object of which it is justly proud: to-day it has the gratification of seeing its income expended entirely for benevolent and educational purposes, having completed more than a century and a quarter of active existence of inestimable value to the city.



## GOVERNMENT

### *Executive Committee*

THIS Society is unique in that it has no governing board, all legislation being carried on and enacted by the entire body, and prior to 1892 there was no way whereby the representatives of the various committees could, under its constitution, be brought together to consider the general policies of the Society, and the tendency was to an administration of the affairs by each of the several committees without regard to the necessities of other departments. At this time the Executive Committee was formed, and consists of the chairmen of the several standing committees. This executive body has no actual authority to legislate, its function being to consider generally the well-being of the Society, and to recommend to the same such legislation as may be of interest to or for the benefit of the parent body. There is abundant evidence that by bringing together representatives of the several departments there has developed a broad view and administration of the Society's

affairs that could not have been accomplished in any other way.

This committee ascertains the probable income for each year, and, based upon careful estimates of their requirements presented by representatives of each of the standing committees, recommends to the Society such amount as should be appropriated to each department for its proper conduct during the year.

This committee also procures and distributes all of the supplies necessary for carrying on the work of the organization.

### *Finance Committee*

THIS committee is the constituted custodian of all the Society's real estate and personal property. Under its supervision taxes and other expenses are approved and paid, its properties insured and all expenses of betterment or maintenance directed. A capable and energetic superintendent, who is also assistant to the Treasurer-Secretary, is daily on duty to carry out their policies and to report necessary repairs or improvements. One of the properties under its care, viz., No. 239

Broadway, known as the Varick Building, was purchased in 1802 from Mayor Richard Varick. Mechanics Institute (16-24 West Forty-fourth Street) was acquired in 1899. It also cares for the spacious plot in Cypress Hills Cemetery, with its beautiful monument.

### **Pension Committee**

FROM the year 1790, this feature of the Society's work has been carefully and discreetly managed by what was first known as "The Board of Overseers of the Indigent," then as "Almoners of the Society," and now as the Committee on Pensions, whose duty it was and is, to exercise a fatherly care over the beneficiaries.

From an Act to incorporate the Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen of the City of New York for Charitable Purposes; passed the fourteenth day of March, 1792, we quote the following:

"For the laudable purposes of protecting and supporting such of their brethren as by sickness or accident may stand in need of assistance, and for the relief of the widows and orphans of those who may

die, leaving little or no property for their support, by their petition, presented to the Legislature, have prayed to be incorporated, to enable them more beneficently to carry into effect their charitable intentions."

As early as 1789 this resolution appears upon its records, as its fundamental object:

"To raise a fund by subscription within themselves for the relief of such of their fellow-citizens who may, through the various vicissitudes of fortune, claim a share of their munificence, to rescue, from the cold hand of poverty and distress, the mourning widow and helpless orphan."

The records show that the Society's chief aim and purpose in the beginning, is still the special feature of its many interests to-day.

Whenever an application for relief or assistance is received by the committee, it is first referred to the sub-committee in whose district the applicant resides, who immediately investigates the necessity, and determines the amount which in its judgment, the circumstances and conditions require, reporting same to the General Com-

mittee at its next meeting (advanced age or physical infirmities receiving special consideration); then the same is reported to the Society with such recommendations as the committee think proper.

The pensioners on the rolls receive pensions quarterly in such amounts as have been sanctioned by the Society, and as provided by the rules and regulations.

*Daniel D. Wright Pension Fund* supplements this very important branch of our work; the sum of \$10,000 was bequeathed in trust to invest and to pay the interest arising therefrom equally among such widows as are pensioners of the Society, in November and February of each year.

### School Committee

COMMENCING its educational work by the establishment of a school for the children of its members, at a time when there was no adequate system in the community; extending its benefit to others when it was proven a success, it maintained the good work until it was no longer necessary, as the city discovered its need, and established the Public School System, pat-

terned largely after ours. It then changed from a day school for general education to a night school for special education or training of apprentices and those employed through the day in different trades or arts, instructing them as to the technical side of same, and thereby giving them the opportunity to improve their positions and become more valuable to the community. This was accomplished by the teaching of drawing (free-hand, mechanical and architectural).

At one time it maintained a Department of Typewriting and Stenography which was successfully operated for a number of years.

The architectural course covers three consecutive years, the first consisting of elementary work in projections, detail drawings of windows and doors, cornice details, timber construction and masonry details.

Second year course—plans and elevations of frame houses, exterior and interior details in various materials, preference being given to suburban conditions.

Third year course—general plans and elevations with details of construction, instruction in the building laws of the city of New York, plan reading and estimating.

In order to secure a diploma the student must have a working knowledge of arithmetic through square root, or pass an examination in workshop mathematics, consisting of arithmetic, the simple equations of algebra and the principles of geometry, as applied to shop practice.

The mechanical drafting course consists of an elementary one for beginners, work in projections, principles applied to simple working drawings, isometric drawing, tracings, talks on shop methods and blue printing. Then it is sub-divided into drafting for cornice and sheet-metal workers; for electrical industries, yacht, ship and topographical drafting, mechanism, drafting of gears, screws and cams as well as Patent Office drafting. To graduate and receive a diploma it is necessary that the student shall have acquired a suitable proficiency in either of these subjects, and also have the same mathematical qualifications as for the architectural courses.

Free-hand drawing consists of an elementary course for beginners, drawing from the antique, and from the draped or nude. Also the study of decorative design and the

laws and principles of ornament, original elementary and advanced applied design.

There is a special class in carriage and automobile drafting, members of which are restricted to those actually employed in the carriage, automobile or allied trades.

Modeling consists of a three-year course. The first year, an elementary one, introducing the study of foliage, fruits and flowers; second year—modeling for purposes related to the pupil's occupation. The characteristics of the various styles used in ornamental design and modeling from plaster casts. Third year—a continuation of second year work along more advanced lines.

Mathematics: In mathematics we have an elementary class in arithmetic for beginners and those desiring to review the subject. Courses in elementary algebra and geometry, and in applied mechanics. The course in mathematics is one of the valuable adjuncts.

The class in industrial electricity is restricted to those actually employed in it or in allied trade, or to students who have finished their course in physics. It teaches the underlying principles of electricity, magnetism and machine design, used in the

construction of the various machines and apparatus in daily use, with a working knowledge of how to use the measuring and other instruments necessary to successful operation.

The class in physics teaches the principles of mechanics, light, heat, electricity and magnetism, including the properties of matter, laws of work, motion and energy, determination of specific gravity, pressure and densities of fluids, and the laws of electric currents and their measurements; the effectiveness of this class is greatly restricted by lack of sufficient apparatus.

The school department is working to the fullest capacity permitted by the funds apportioned. There are on the rolls over 2,000 students, divided into two classes of two nights each, some of the students taking double time, or four nights per week.

### **Library Committee**

**T**HIS department was organized and put into active operation ninety-four (94) years ago, viz., in 1820, and on Evacuation Day, and was considered so important an event that the Mayor of the

city, members of the Legislature and of the Common Council were present and as a feature books were for the first time loaned, and the circulating library system was inaugurated, although at that time books were only loaned to apprentices; ten years later the privilege was extended to members of the Society at an annual fee of one dollar; in 1863 the use of the library and reading-rooms was extended free to wounded soldiers and sailors. In 1872 the circulating and reference sections were established as distinct departments. In 1897 high-water mark was reached both in the number of volumes contained in the combined libraries, viz., 114,820 and in the number of books circulated, viz., 275,362. For several years and prior to 1903 the city of New York, under a "permissive" law, made appropriations based on circulation towards the maintenance, but since that year, and also by reason of the extension of the library system of the city, none has been made and the entire expense is borne by the Society. Applications for the privilege of the circulating section may be signed as guarantor by members of the Society or by the librarian under

certain conditions. Students in our school are a privileged class.

The Reference section is singularly rich in Architectural Works and those on Science and Art, and may be consulted at all proper times in comfortable reading-rooms. Especial attention is invited to two rare works on view in the Executive rooms, viz: "Description de l'Egypte" being Napoleon's observations of Egypt compiled for the French Government in 1809. This collection was presented by Brother William H. Webb and is one of a very limited edition and is very beautiful and of great value. "Ancient Roman Architecture," by Giovanni Battista Piranesi, a collection of 1,180 remarkable etchings, many of the plates from 100 to 250 years old, also two volumes 100 plates on Pompeii, these being the gift of Brother John Malcolm Mossman.

#### **Literary Committee**

THE charter of the Society was early amended permitting it to provide literary and scientific knowledge by means of lectures and otherwise and for eighty years it has maintained lecture

courses, at one time of remarkable scope, such distinguished men as Bayard Taylor, Wendell Phillips, George William Curtis, Revs. Beecher, Talmage, Deems, etc., having appeared before our audiences. These lectures were and are always free to our guests.

#### **Building and Sinking Fund Committee**

IN 1872 the Sinking Fund was established and the Building and Sinking Fund Committee appointed, and for forty-one years the Society has, without interruption, appropriated a portion of its income to this fund, and as the result of this policy many emergencies have been met and to-day the Society is free from debt and the fund, while small, is steadily growing.

#### **Trade School Committee**

TWENTY years or more ago the Society realized that the old-time apprenticeship system would ultimately be brushed aside by modernism. Those active in its educational work also realized that if the building industries were to flourish and keep pace with the march of progress, the education of the young mechanic could not



be neglected, and as the trade-school offered the only substitute for instruction heretofore received in the shop under the guidance of the master, scholarships were provided at the New York Trade School for deserving young men, and have since been continued.

These scholarships are open to young men working at a trade and to those having a mechanical bent seeking development. Instruction is given in the following classes for the different trades: bricklaying, plastering, plumbing, electrical work, wood pattern making, house painting and plain decorating, blacksmith's work, printing, sign painting, cornice and skylight work, steam and hot water fitting.

The lack of sufficient means to carry on this work in true proportion to the necessities of the time has limited the number of scholarships at our disposal; there is, however, a satisfaction in knowing that while the scholarships were limited, the young men were and are of high character and persevering spirit, and the letters received from many who availed themselves of the opportunity thus presented, afford abundant reason for further development of our educational work along

handicraft or trade school lines. We welcome the application of any young man; endorsement by a member of the Society, while desirable, is not necessary, as the interest of any employer in the welfare and future of the young mechanic is not only our interest, but a co-operation on the part of the employer that is most necessary if the dignity of labor is to be perpetuated.

Appreciating the desirability of technical higher education, we endeavor to recruit from the rolls of our technical classes where possible.

#### **Membership Committee**

**T**HIS committee receives all applications for membership, carefully investigating and reporting upon all names to the Society.

#### **Auditing Committee**

**T**HE books and accounts of the Treasurer are carefully examined quarterly, as well as all documents of value, and each month all bills for purchases as approved by the several standing committees, are examined, for payment; all evidence of

indebtedness to be paid by the Treasurer must have the approval of the originating and the auditing committees.

#### **Museum Committee**

A STEADILY growing and most interesting collection is on exhibition in the library gallery on the main floor and has for its chief attraction the unique collection of locks, known as the John M. Mossman Foundation. A cordial invitation is extended to all to visit and examine the collection and other articles of interest, and gifts or loans of historical value are solicited.



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